

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 8NATION
7-14 July 1984

ARTICLES.

■ A PENTAGON-C.I.A. PRODUCTION

The Special Forces
In 'Covert Action'

PETER H. STONE

A few months ago the Pentagon telephoned retired Air Force Major General Edward Lansdale. His voice cracks now, but Lansdale says he still likes to advise the government. So when the Pentagon invited him to address a two-day conference on new tactics to use against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the leftist rebels in El Salvador, he readily assented. The choice of Lansdale was more than serendipitous. In military circles he is legendary as a veteran of Third World struggles. A World War II ace with the Office of Strategic Services, he made his name in the Philippines in the 1950s, masterminding the Central Intelligence Agency's covert tricks and military "civic action" programs which were crucial in defeating the Huk guerrillas. He went on to South Vietnam, where he devised the clever system of green and red voting cards that helped Ngo Dinh Diem garner 98 percent of the vote in 1955. The cards bearing Diem's name were red, which represents good luck in Asia, while those bearing his opponent's name were green, which is associated with cuckolds. With Lansdale's record, it is no wonder Graham Greene used him as the model for Pyle in *The Quiet American*, the tale of an innocent Yankee whose efforts to spread the American way bring only destruction and death in their wake.

Although he won't reveal the details of his address to the Pentagon conference, Lansdale says he proposed a broad campaign of "psychological operations" for Central America. "I don't think conventional forces work," he told me. "I'm concerned that the government hasn't caught on how to handle these things." Some idea of what Lansdale might have suggested can be inferred from an interview he gave last year to *The Journal of Defense and Diplomacy*, in which he lauded the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" and argued that a strategy of political action was needed to oppose leftist insurgencies in Central America: "Since there are political minds and political forces that direct the subversive actions in the target countries, they certainly offer themselves as targets for political attack. . . . If we can reach them, and they can be made to give up their aims, the insurgency they direct and support will wither and die."

Lansdale says he doesn't know if the Pentagon took his advice, but the fact that he was asked to contribute his ideas is itself emblematic of the important shift in Pentagon

thinking that has occurred during the Reagan Administration—especially within the last year, as the influence of the State Department has waned and that of the Pentagon and the C.I.A. has risen. The Pentagon and the C.I.A. have collaborated closely in building a network of bases in Honduras for overt and covert operations, and they have developed backdoor mechanisms for supporting the Nicaraguan *contras* despite Congressional reins on C.I.A. spending. Not yet ready to commit combat troops to the region because of the political risks at home, the Pentagon has revived many elements of the counterinsurgency strategy employed in the Vietnam War, including the expanded use of Special Forces which often work closely with the C.I.A. They comprise Army Green Berets and Rangers, Navy Seals and what the Air Force generically calls special operating forces. Consider the following signs:

§ The Joint Special Operations Agency was formed early this year to coordinate the various elements of the Special Forces in all the services.

§ The Army and the Navy have expanded their elite forces substantially. By October 1, 1985, the Army should have about 6,000 men in its units, up from 4,000 in 1983. The four Navy Seal units in the United States, which according to a Navy spokesman are "somewhat smaller" than the Army's elite units, have been buying new equipment. The Air Force now has about 3,200 Special Forces troops and has ordered twenty-one MC-130 Combat Talon planes which can be used for their rapid deployment.

§ To insure better coordination, the Army set up the First Special Operations Command in 1982, and the Air Force set up a similar command, the Twenty-third Air Force, last year.

§ The Pentagon has been sending Special Forces to Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica. In Honduras 100 to 150 men, most located at Puerto Castilla, have been running the regional military training center at which 4,191 elite troops from El Salvador and 2,180 from Honduras have been trained. About forty members of the Special Forces are assigned to El Salvador and about six to Costa Rica. A battalion unit with 250 of them is based nearby in Panama. And the Army's 250-member Intelligence Support Activity, formed in 1980 to combat terrorism, is also reportedly operating in Central America under an expanded mandate.

The Special Forces were conceived in the early 1960s by a group of Pentagon advisers working closely with President Kennedy. Part of a "flexible response" strategy to deal with guerrilla and other unconventional warfare in Third World countries, they were designed as highly mobile, small units, capable of crossing enemy lines and conducting a range of operations that would include assassinations, hit-and-run missions, sabotage and psychological warfare. In 1962 Kennedy created the Special Group for Counterinsurgency to